

District Court Gavel Passes To Rasin in Changing of Guard

Administrative Judge for Anne Arundel County District Court Becomes First Woman to Lead Development of Maryland's Court of First Resort

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Maryland's judiciary celebrated yet another milestone yesterday, as the state's chief judge named a woman to lead the state's district court for the first time.

Calling it "an important day in the 350-year history of the judiciary," Chief Judge Robert C. Murphy announced Judge Martha F. Rasin, currently administrative judge for the Anne Arundel District Court, would preside over the state-wide district court.

In the midst of a push to diversify the state court system, Murphy said he made his decision without regard to gender.

"I'm proud as a woman to have done this," Rasin said.

Rasin's appointment follows the retirement Monday of outgoing District Court Chief Judge Robert F. Sweeney, who served as the district court's only chief judge since its inception in 1971.

Sweeney guided the court from a bold experiment to a fully-functioning court system that often represents the first contact Marylanders have with the judicial system.

"The chief judge is not a primary adjudicator but must know the process inside and out," Murphy said. "Judge Rasin brings considerable administrative, management and judicial experience to this position."

Noting that Rasin's appointment represented a "changing of the guard," Murphy said that Sweeney himself recommended Rasin as a possible successor to the position as early as last year.

After Murphy's announcement yesterday, Sweeney praised Rasin's work on the bench and in the legislature, where she has testified before the General Assembly on the issue of domestic violence.

"She has the qualities of lead-

ership I hope are necessary for a position of this kind," Sweeney said. "The people of Maryland are singularly blessed to have this talented woman accept this responsibility."

Rasin — a 1981 University of Baltimore Law School graduate — said she is ready to preside over the court and carry it into the next century.

The court "runs 100 miles-per-hour and rarely misses a beat — this is a product of Judge Sweeney's tender loving care," she said. "I have a lot to learn in the next few months."

Rasin added that it was too early to tell what, if any, changes she would make in court administration, as she only learned of her appointment Monday morning — the day Sweeney retired.

"It's been made without my having a lot of opportunity to think about all the changes that should be made, not that a lot of things need to be changed," she said. "There's really nothing I can say at this time."

Rasin's appointment came after Gov. Parris N. Glendening

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JUDGE MARTHA F. RASIN

Appointment

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last year vowed to diversify the bench. But Murphy said yesterday that he selected Rasin without the governor's input.

Of the ten candidates for the chief judgeship, three were women — Rasin, Baltimore City District Court Administrative Judge Mary Ellen T. Rinehardt and Prince George's County District Court Judge Theresa A. Nolan.

Murphy also said he met with Glendening on several occasions to explain to the governor that the decision on Sweeney's replacement was not the executive branch's call to make.

"He finally understood that the appointment was mine and not his own, which he didn't fully appreciate at the beginning," he said.

Murphy added that he did not tell Glendening of his selection prior to yesterday's announcement, observing that the governor "doesn't tell me who he's going to appoint."

In a statement issued yesterday, Glendening praised Rasin's elevation as a boon to Marylanders.

"Judge Martha Rasin brings years of judicial and trial experience to this position," he said. "Judge Rasin's appointment is also consistent with my administration's goal of creating an inclusive government at all levels."

Former Governor William Donald Schaefer, who appointed Rasin to the district court in 1989, said yesterday that he was "absolutely thrilled" with Rasin's appointment.

"When I appointed her, I knew she was a top notch lawyer and would make an outstanding judge — and she's met all those expectations," he said. "She's wonderful, and she will do a great job."

The District Court — created in 1970 to unify the then-existing municipal courts — is staffed by a corps of 100 judges and more than 1,200 employees. Rasin will be responsible for the court's administration, including the appointment of administrative judges within each of the system's 12 districts, clerks and court commissioners.